SELF-HELP AND CHILD ABUSE: VICTIMS, VICTIMIZERS, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-CONTROL

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ABSTRACT: Study of child abusers reveals that many victimizers were once victims and that the behaviors underlying the perspectives of victims and victimizers are related. Three groups of abusing parents using directed self-help were studied at Parents Anonymous by participant observation methodology for two and-a-half years. Four of the 52 participating parents read and commented on a draft of the research. Their violence appeared to be an attempt to gain a sense of control or to deal with the frustration of not feeling in control. Suggestions are made for developing social services that enhance individuals' sense of control.

The participant observation study of three different Parents Anonymous directed self-help groups reported here offered me the opportunity to study an alternative to traditional social services. As usually happens with the study of any alternative, one not only learns about the new system but also develops a new vantage point from which to view the traditional system.

There are four aspects to this study. First, it is the study of a self-help group. Second, it is a study of child abusers and their response to an aspect of the social service delivery system. Third, it is an exploration of the process through which a counselor comes to understand a
person who has been labeled deviant. Fourth, it is a study of how I, a white middle-class woman, responded to the experience of being a participant observer at Parents Anonymous. Fifty-two persons were observed more than one time over a time span of two years and five months, and four former members read and commented on the second draft of the report.

Parents Anonymous

Parents Anonymous (PA) is a self-help group for parents who have abused their children. The national organization was founded in California in 1974 by Leonard Lieber, a psychiatric social worker, and Jolly K., a mother who had seriously abused her children. The original program worked most effectively with parents who “explode” and cause physical or emotional abuse to their children (Lieber, 1983).

PA provides directed self-help, which means that professionals and boards of community volunteers are responsible for the agency. Parents Anonymous states:

Directed self-help is a modification of the self-help service modality. In directed self-help programs, participants still provide a good deal of mutual support, peer counseling, and skills development, but there is added to the process professional supervision and/or facilitation. The involved professional may be a volunteer, but he/she is credentialed and/or specially trained and draws on his/her professional knowledge to assist the group.

While Parents Anonymous is committed to maintaining an accepting atmosphere in the groups, agency and staff personnel expect that members will be able to curb serious abuse after attending a few meetings. Sponsors will not report members who confess to a certain amount of hitting and spanking, but they will report to social service authorities instances where there appears to be danger to a child.

The Study Introduced Complexity

The more that I became involved with this study of self-help, the more I realized what a unique opportunity it gave me to learn about the thoughts and feelings of those involved with child abuse. I observed people who were experiencing a crisis in their lives while they